PATTERNS OF POWER · A FRAMEWORK CASE STUDY

THE DEED AND THE SWORD

The modern United States as the richest and most sophisticated case in the record of a belief grown so deep that a third of a billion people work its machine willingly, mostly without ever seeing a soldier — a secular order in which property, law, and debt feel not like a doctrine but like arithmetic, like nature, like freedom itself; told with the same lens turned on the Temple of Jerusalem and the House of Mecca, held to the hardest fairness of the set, because it is the reader's own world, and because what lies beneath it is not a freer world but the warlord; a self-contained study, assuming no prior reading and no politics

A case study in the Patterns of Power series · thomas J. Bryan with Claude (Anthropic) · held as tested, not revealed

The wage that arrives already lightened

An American gets paid on Friday, and the money that reaches him has already been made smaller before he ever touches it. Before the wage is his, the government has taken its income-tax withholding and its payroll tax — some 7.65 per cent of it straight off the top for Social Security and Medicare, matched by a slice from his employer he never sees at all — so that the number on the cheque is the number after the state has been paid, and he never holds the fuller sum, and therefore never quite feels it leave. He buys groceries and pays a sales tax he barely notices. If he owns his home he pays a property tax every year, in effect a rent to the state on land he thinks he owns outright, and if he ever stops paying it the state will take the home and sell it. He pays a fee for his driver's licence, a fee to register his car, a fee for the permit to build a deck. On the house he pays mortgage interest; on the car, loan interest; on the credit card, the highest interest of all, better than a fifth of the balance each year. And nearly every time he taps that card, a small toll — two or three per cent — is skimmed from the transaction by a pair of payment networks, charged to the merchant and folded silently into the price he pays. He does all of this without resentment and mostly without noticing, because it is simply how the world works.

Stand back from him, as this collection has stood back from a Judean farmer carrying his half-shekel and a Muslim pilgrim crying *Here I am*, and you are looking at the same machine those studies found — organised force, a legitimating belief, and an extraction that flows toward a hierarchy — only here it has reached a sophistication and a scale that no temple or caliphate ever approached. The hierarchy at the top of the American order is richer than any pharaoh, any church, any emperor in the history of the world, and it is funded and obeyed and defended by a third of a billion people who almost never see a soldier or a policeman in connection with any of it. The worker is not being extracted from, as he understands it. He is a free citizen paying his lawful taxes, honouring his freely-signed contracts, and buying what he chooses. The machine that lightens his wage and rents him his money runs almost entirely on his own belief that this is simply how a free country works — and the force that stands, in the last resort, behind every piece of it has been kept so far out of sight that he can live his whole life and never glimpse it. This paper takes that machine apart, as it took the Temple and the House apart, and then shows the sword.

What this paper assumes, and why this is the hardest case

It assumes you hold no framework and no politics, so both will be built up from nothing, and one warning must be set down first, because this case is harder than the others in a way that matters. The Temple fell two thousand years ago; the early caliphate, thirteen hundred. You can look at them coolly

because they are not your home. The order this paper examines is the reader's own, still running, and its central claims are the very things Americans fight about most bitterly — so the discipline that has governed every study in this collection must be held here more tightly than anywhere, and stated plainly before we start.

The framework beneath this collection is simple. At the bottom of every large order is force — organised, armed, able to make you obey by threatening a cost you will not pay: the *floor*. Ruling by force alone is exhausting and dangerous, so every durable power lays over the floor a story — a belief that makes the arrangement feel natural and right, so that people obey willingly and the force can retire out of sight: the *robe*. When the robe sinks deep enough into enough generations that no one can see it as a made thing any more, but only as the plain shape of reality, the order needs almost no force at all, because the people hold it up themselves. That is the *machine that runs itself*, and the United States is its richest and most refined example — not because Americans are more credulous than anyone else, but because their robe is the most successful secular robe ever woven, one that feels not like a faith but like arithmetic.

Here is the discipline, in four parts, and it holds to the last line. First: to call the American order a machine with a floor and a robe is *not* to call it evil, and it is not a brief for tearing it down. The same organs that extract also do vast good, and the belief that sustains it is largely sincere and, in great part, *true enough to live inside* — which, as we will see, is exactly why it took. Second: this order is, by most measures, the least coercive and most prosperous large society human beings have yet built, and nothing in this analysis denies that; the freedom is real, the prosperity is real, the rights and the recourse are real. Third: where the facts are genuinely contested — and the sharpest claim in this paper, about who writes the rules, is contested by serious people — this paper gives the argument on both sides and does not pretend the matter is settled. And fourth, most important: seeing the machine is not a reason to smash it. The lesson of every other study in this collection — the Temple broken by Rome, the caliphate's wars, every order this framework has watched collapse — is that what lies *beneath* a functioning order is not a freer world waiting to be liberated. It is the warlord: raw force with no robe at all. So to understand the American machine is to be handed an argument for *re-forming* it, never for detonating it, because the thing under it is worse. Hold all four, and we can proceed honestly.

The floor: what actually stands behind the deed

Begin with the force, because it is real even though it is almost never seen, and seeing where it hides is the first step. The United States keeps the most powerful military in the history of the world, and beneath that, closer to the citizen, a dense apparatus of coercion: police, sheriffs, marshals, courts, jails, a prison population among the largest on earth. This is the floor. But its genius, and the reason the citizen forgets it exists, is what it mostly does, which is not to patrol him but to stand, silent and invisible, behind two abstractions: contract and property.

Consider a deed — the piece of paper that says a house is yours. On its own it is ink. What makes it mean anything is that, in the last resort, if someone else occupies your house and will not leave, men with guns will come, on the order of a court, and remove them. Property is not a fact of nature, like the height of a mountain; it is a *claim*, and a claim is only as real as the force that will enforce it. The same is true of every contract, every loan, every debt: they are promises, and what turns a promise into an iron obligation is the knowledge that behind it stands the whole apparatus of courts and sheriffs and, at the end of the line, the gun. This is the floor of the American order, and it is the same floor the Temple rested on and the caliphate rested on — organised violence, backing a claim of ownership. The only difference, and it is the difference that makes the machine so smooth, is *what* it backs: not an altar and not a throne, but a deed and a note. And here is the turn that reveals the whole structure. The citizen who owns nothing — no house, no capital — still pays, through his taxes, for the floor that guarantees he cannot touch the property of the citizen who owns much. The propertyless fund the force that protects property from the propertyless. They do it without complaint, because they too believe that property is sacred and must be defended — which is the robe, already doing the floor's work.

The robe: property, law, and the sacred debt

For the American robe is a secular sacred, and it is worth stating its creed plainly, because most Americans have never heard it stated at all — they have only ever *lived* inside it, which is the mark of how deep it goes. The creed runs roughly thus: that private property is a natural right, a thing you own by nature and not by the grant of any state; that the law is neutral and applies equally to all, rich and poor alike; that a contract freely signed must be honoured, and a debt freely taken must be paid; that lawful authority must be obeyed; and that anyone, by merit and effort, can rise — the American Dream. None of this is written on a temple wall or recited in a prayer. It does not feel like a belief at all. It feels like common sense, like the way things obviously are, like arithmetic — and that is precisely what a robe feels like when it has taken completely. The Judean did not experience the Temple cult as a doctrine he had been taught; he experienced it as the truth of the world. The American does not experience "property is sacred" as an ideology; he experiences it as reality.

And you can measure how deep the robe has sunk by a single, ordinary cruelty. When a man loses his job, falls behind on his mortgage, and has his house foreclosed and sold on the courthouse steps, his neighbours do not, as a rule, rally to stop it. They may pity him, but they do not stand in the road. Most, in their hearts, feel that the order is being served — that he borrowed and did not repay, that a debt is a debt, that the bank is only claiming what is lawfully its own, and that to interfere would be to violate something close to sacred. The robe has so thoroughly taken that the citizens enforce it *on each other*, for free, and feel righteous while doing it. The floor almost never has to appear at a foreclosure, because the belief has already done the work: the debtor himself usually leaves without being carried out, convinced that he is in the wrong. That is the machine running itself at its purest — the sword

sheathed, the belief so complete that the extracted man polices himself and his neighbours applaud the order that is stripping him. No caliph or high priest ever achieved obedience cheaper than this.

The extraction, part one: the tax that funds the floor

Now trace the money, in two streams, because the American extraction is larger and subtler than any this collection has studied. The first stream is tax, and its masterpiece is *withholding*. Before 1943 most Americans who owed income tax paid it themselves, in a lump, once a year — and a tax you must hand over in a single painful cheque is a tax you notice and resent. In 1943, amid the Second World War, Congress required employers to withhold the income tax from wages before the worker was paid, framed as a patriotic necessity for the war effort, and passed with little opposition. It never went away. Its brilliance, understood at the time, was that a tax removed before you ever hold the money is a tax you scarcely feel — the worker experiences only his smaller net wage as "his pay," and never mourns the fuller sum he never touched. To this the payroll taxes were joined, taken the same invisible way, funding Social Security and Medicare, so that today payroll taxes alone supply about a third of all federal revenue and the income tax about half, most of it collected before the citizen's hand ever closes on it.

Then, layered on top, the taxes he does see but has learned not to question: the sales tax skimmed from nearly every purchase; the property tax that is, in truth, a perpetual rent to the state on land he calls his own, forever, on pain of losing it; and the endless fees — for the licence, the registration, the permit, the inspection — each one a small payment to the state for permission to do an ordinary thing. And this whole first stream funds, among much else, the floor: the military, the police, the courts that back the property-and-contract order. So the circle closes on the propertyless worker in the plainest way: his withheld payroll tax helps pay for the force that guards the fortunes of those with the most to guard. He funds his own floor, and he does it, mostly, gladly.

The extraction, part two: the rent on capital

The second stream is larger, and the author of this framework saw it clearly: it is *interest* — the rent paid for the use of capital by those who lack it to those who have it. The American worker does not, as a rule, buy his house or his car or his degree with money he has; he borrows, and pays rent on the borrowing, for years or for life. Americans now owe on the order of eighteen trillion dollars in household debt — some twelve to thirteen trillion of it in mortgages, over a trillion on credit cards, more than a trillion and a half each in auto and student loans — and on every dollar of it, interest flows, continuously and lawfully, from those who needed to borrow to those who had capital to lend. On a mortgage the rent is perhaps six per cent; on a credit card carried month to month, better than twenty-one per cent; on the loans of the poorest and least creditworthy, higher still, so that the less capital a man has, the more dearly he pays for access to it. In a single recent year, credit-card issuers

alone took in something on the order of a hundred and thirty billion dollars in interest and fees. This is the deepest extraction in the system, and the citizen experiences none of it as extraction. He experiences it as the cost of money, as obvious as the price of bread. That capital commands a rent, that those who have it grow richer in their sleep while those who lack it pay for the lack — this is, to the American, simply how the world is, as natural and unquestioned as the Judean's tithe.

And beneath even the interest runs a smaller, stranger toll that shows the machine's reach into the tiniest transaction. Every time a card is tapped, the payment networks — Visa and Mastercard, which between them control better than four-fifths of the market, a duopoly — take an interchange fee, two to three per cent of the sale. It is charged to the merchant, but the merchant folds it into his prices, so that everyone, cardholder and cash-payer alike, pays it in the end. Across the whole economy these swipe fees now total somewhere around two hundred billion dollars a year, costing the average family well over a thousand dollars annually — a levy the reformers who want it curbed call, with justice, a private sales tax, collected not by any government but by two private companies, on nearly every purchase in the country. It is extraction so woven into ordinary commerce that it is not even called a tax. It is just the cost of buying things. And the hierarchy that gathers all these streams — the tax, the interest, the fees — is, once more, richer than any priesthood or dynasty that ever ruled.

It is not stupidity: the trust and the naturalisation

Why does the citizen accept all this, and why is it a mistake to call him a dupe? The answer is the one every study in this collection has reached, and it is the deepest point in the framework. No person can verify for himself most of what he believes about a world too large to check alone; he knows almost everything by trusting those who seem to know — and this is not the weakness of fools but the very design of human understanding. The American cannot himself work out whether the financial system is fair, whether the law is truly neutral, whether the terms of his mortgage are just; he trusts — the bank, the contract, the courts, the experts, the whole apparatus that assures him the rules are square and the game is on the level. That trust is rational, and it is the thing the order runs on. What is captured, here as everywhere, is not the citizen's reason but his trust — his rational, necessary deference to the institutions that hold the knowledge he cannot check.

And the belief he trusts, the sense that property is a natural right and the law a neutral referee, *feels* like a fact of nature but is in truth a built thing, assembled over centuries. What may be owned, and how, and by whom — the corporation, the mortgage, the patent, the limited-liability company, the security, the whole intricate law of property and contract — was made, piece by piece, by legislatures and courts across generations, each handing down rules that served the situation and the interests of its time, and then became, to those born after, simply the way the world is. This is the pattern the study of the Temple named and the study of Islam confirmed: an order built by human hands, each generation legislating for its own moment and attributing the result to nature or to the timeless logic of freedom, until no seam shows and the whole structure is invisible as water to a fish. That it was

built does not make it false, and does not make the citizen a fool. The rule of law is real; it protects him too; the property right that secures the billionaire's tower also secures the poor man's car against his neighbour. But it was built, and it was built, in no small part, to protect and to grow capital — and the man raised inside it can no more see that than he can see the air.

Who writes the rules

Here is the sharpest claim, the one the author saw and the one this paper must handle with the most care, because it is where honest people most disagree. The claim, in the framework's terms, is that the machine has a tendency to protect itself — that those who hold the most capital have an outsized hand in writing the very rules by which capital is acquired and kept, so that the arrangement reproduces itself and resists redistribution, while the taxes of all pay for the floor that enforces it. Lay out the mechanism, then lay out the dispute, and do not pretend to settle what is not settled.

The mechanism is this. It costs an enormous amount of money to win federal office — a winning House seat now runs into the millions, a Senate seat often into the tens of millions, and the 2024 federal elections cost, all told, on the order of sixteen billion dollars. Since the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* decision in 2010 opened the door to unlimited outside spending, an ever-larger share of that money flows through super-PACs and undisclosed "dark money" channels, and a striking portion of it comes from a very small number of very rich people. Those who fund the campaigns gain access to and influence over those who win, who write the laws — including the tax code, financial regulation, and property and corporate law itself. And wealth in America is highly concentrated: by the Federal Reserve's own distributional accounts, the richest one per cent of households hold roughly a third of all wealth, and the top tenth roughly two-thirds, while the bottom half hold almost none. Put these together and you have, at minimum, a strong structural tendency: the people who benefit most from the rules have the most resources to shape who writes them, and a live interest in blocking any rule that would redistribute the gains. The stalled effort to curb those swipe fees is a small, clean example — a reform with bipartisan support and obvious benefit to consumers and small merchants, repeatedly proposed and repeatedly going nowhere against the lobbying of the banks and networks that profit.

Now the dispute, given its full weight, because the framework's honesty depends on it. Some political scientists — most famously Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page, in a much-cited 2014 study — found that economic elites and organised business groups have substantial influence on federal policy while the preferences of average citizens have little independent effect, and concluded that the United States looks, on their data, more like an oligarchy than a majoritarian democracy. But that finding has been seriously challenged: other scholars, re-examining the same data, argue that elite and middle-class preferences are so highly correlated that the two cannot cleanly be separated, that where they do diverge the outcome is closer to a coin-flip than to elite dominance, and that the "average citizen has no influence" conclusion is overstated. And the plain historical record cuts against any

simple picture of a closed oligarchy: the United States *does* redistribute, and massively — it spends far more, through Social Security and Medicare and Medicaid and the rest, on transfers to ordinary and poorer citizens than it spends on its entire military and police floor combined; and against elite interests it has, at intervals, abolished slavery, broken trusts, built the New Deal and the Great Society, extended the vote, and regulated finance. Power in America is not a sealed loop. It is a contested field with a heavy, persistent thumb on the scale for capital — which is a more modest and more defensible claim than a conspiracy, and it is the one this framework makes: not that the rich rule outright, but that the machine tilts, structurally and durably, toward those who own it, and that the tilt is hard to correct precisely because correcting it requires the consent of those it favours.

The richest hierarchy, and the good it does

Which brings us to the balance the author himself insisted on: it is not all evil, and the same organs that extract also do enormous good. This is not a concession that softens the analysis; it is the heart of it, because it explains why the robe took. The military that backs the property order also underwrites a world order under which, for all its violence, more of humanity has grown richer and freer than ever before. The police who guard the rich man's assets also answer when the poor man is robbed. The courts that enforce the sacred debt also enforce the citizen's rights against the state and against the powerful, and sometimes — not always, but sometimes — the powerful lose. The taxes that fund the floor also fund the roads, the schools, the research that cured diseases, the pensions that keep the old from destitution, the safety net that catches the fallen. The capital markets that extract their rivers of interest also funded the innovations that doubled the human lifespan and lifted billions worldwide out of poverty. This is what a robe that has genuinely *taken* looks like: it is not a trick played on the credulous but a machine that delivers real and enormous goods, and delivers them widely enough that the belief in it becomes, for most people most of the time, true enough to live inside. The Englishman's rule of law really did run; the American order really does produce prosperity and rights and recourse on a scale no previous order approached. That realness is not evidence against the robe. It is the *source of its power* — the reason a third of a billion people hold the order up with their own hands, gladly, and cannot imagine it otherwise.

The machine runs itself

For that is the naturalisation, complete. To the American citizen, none of this is a system that could be arranged differently; it is simply how a free and modern country works. Property is natural. Debts are sacred. The law is neutral. Taxes are the price of civilisation. Interest is the cost of money. The rich are rich because they earned it, or because that is how the game is played, and the game is fair. He enforces the order on himself — pays his taxes before he sees them, pays his debts on the day they fall due, respects other men's property as he would have his own respected — and he enforces it on his

neighbours, judging the tax cheat and the deadbeat and the squatter, all without a soldier in sight, all out of sincere conviction that the order is right. The floor can stay almost entirely invisible, sheathed and forgotten, because the belief does virtually all the holding. This is the machine that runs itself at the highest level of sophistication yet reached in human history: a secular, legal, self-enforcing order that a third of a billion people fund and obey and police, mostly gladly, and cannot see as anything but reality itself — the best-tailored robe ever cut, so perfectly fitted to the body beneath it that the wearer is certain he is simply naked, and free.

The strongest case against this reading, answered

Because this is the most contested study in the collection, it must end by stating, at full strength, the case against everything it has argued, and then answering it without flinching.

The case is this. What has been called a "machine" extracting for a "hierarchy" is nothing of the kind: it is a free society of voluntary exchange under equal law. No one is forced. The worker chooses his job and may quit it; he chooses whether to borrow and on what terms; he chooses what to buy. Property rights are not a scam but the single greatest protection the weak have ever had against the strong, because they bind the powerful to the same rules as everyone else and give the poor man a claim a court will honour. The system is the least coercive and most prosperous order in the history of the species; mobility is real and millions have risen through it; and the whole talk of "robes over swords" is the tired move of the radical who, having convinced himself that freedom is a trick, sets out to tear down the freest order ever built — and who, wherever he has succeeded, has produced not the liberation he promised but the gulag, the killing field, the warlord with a red flag. To see through the American order, on this view, is not wisdom; it is the first step toward something far worse.

Now answer it, honestly, granting all that is true in it — and much is true. The voluntariness is real, and it is more real here than in any order this collection has studied: the American genuinely may quit his job, switch his loan, choose his purchase, in a way the Judean tenant and the conquered dhimmi never could. The prosperity and the rights are real. And the last point is not only true but is *this framework's own central warning* — the radical who smashes the order in the name of a freedom underneath it is the most dangerous fool in the collection's whole cast, because there is no freedom underneath; there is only the warlord, and every study here is in part a proof of it. So the framework concedes the counter-case its full due. And then it says: the voluntariness has walls the citizen did not choose and cannot leave. He may choose his employer, but not whether he must work for one; he may choose his loan, but not whether he needs capital he does not have; he may choose his purchase, but not whether to pay the toll folded into its price. Consent exercised inside a structure one cannot opt out of is a thinner thing than it looks from the inside. The floor is real even when unseen — stop paying the property tax, or occupy the house whose note you did not pay, and the men with guns will materialise to prove it. And the tilt of the rules toward those who own them is real, even if it is a tendency and not a conspiracy. So the framework's verdict is exactly the author's, and it is the

opposite of the radical's: this is the best-tailored robe ever woven, the least coercive and most productive order yet built, and *for that very reason* it is to be reformed and not destroyed — because what lies beneath it is not liberation but the sword without the robe, which is worse than anything the order does. The honest response to seeing the machine is not to burn it. It is to take the thumb off the scale — to widen the circle of those who are truly inside it, with real recourse and a real share, and to open the writing of the rules beyond the narrow few who can afford to buy a hearing — so that an order which runs on everyone's belief and everyone's compliance might return more of its immense riches to everyone who holds it up.

What the United States shows

Gather it up, and hold all of it at once, as the Temple study held the farmer and the sword together. The United States is the same machine this collection found beneath the courts of Jerusalem and the House of Mecca and the English Crown — organised force, backing a claim of ownership, dressed in a belief that turns a made arrangement into the plain shape of the world — and it is the richest, the most sophisticated, and in one sense the most complete instance ever built, because its robe took so perfectly that it does not look like a robe at all, but like arithmetic, like nature, like freedom. In it you can see every working part at once: the floor, real and almost wholly invisible, standing silent behind every deed and every note; the double extraction of tax and interest, the one made painless by withholding and the other disguised as the mere cost of money; the trust that was never stupidity; the property law built by human hands and become, to those born inside it, as natural as gravity; the loop by which those who own the rules have the largest hand in writing them, contested at the edges but undeniable in its tilt; and, holding all of it up, a third of a billion people who fund and obey and police the order themselves, gladly, and cannot imagine it otherwise — and who are, by the standards of every prior order in this collection, freer and richer for it than any people who ever lived.

The American citizen is not free — not wholly, not in the way the robe tells him; he stands, like the farmer and the pilgrim, inside an order made by hands and enforced, at the last, by force. But he is freer than any of them, and richer, because this robe, uniquely in the record, made a very great deal of its promise come true — and that is not a small thing, and this study does not pretend it is. He is not a dupe, and the order is not a fraud, and the men who built it were not merely cynics; he is a formed man inside a belief that became his world, giving what he genuinely believes he owes, through a machine that turns his genuine belief into someone else's fortune, and does real and enormous good along the way. And the lesson the whole collection presses, stated plainly here at its end where the reader lives: to see the machine is not to be handed a torch. It is to be handed a mirror — and behind the mirror, a warning, because under every machine these studies have opened lies not a freer world but the warlord. The right response to seeing that the order was built is not to burn it down but to build it better: to close the gap between those inside its promise and those merely beneath its floor, and to loosen the grip of the few who write its rules — so that the most successful machine human

beings have ever made to run itself might, at last, run a little more for everyone whose belief keeps it running. That is what the United States shows, seen whole: not a fraud to be exposed, and not a paradise to be defended without question, but a made thing — the best made thing yet — waiting to be made better, by people who can finally see that it was made.

A Note on Sources This paper draws its figures from official and standard sources and flags what is contested. The mechanics and history of tax withholding (the Current Tax Payment Act of 1943, introduced as a wartime measure and retained ever since, with its acknowledged effect of making the tax less painful by making it less visible) follow the standard payroll and tax histories; the FICA payroll-tax rates (6.2 per cent Social Security and 1.45 per cent Medicare on the employee, matched by the employer, 15.3 per cent in all) and the shares of federal revenue (payroll taxes about a third, individual income tax about half) follow the Internal Revenue Service, the Social Security Administration, and the Tax Foundation. Household-debt figures (roughly eighteen trillion dollars total, of which some twelve to thirteen trillion in mortgages, over a trillion in credit-card balances, and over a trillion and a half each in auto and student loans) follow the Federal Reserve Bank of New York's Quarterly Report on Household Debt and Credit and Experian; the average credit-card interest rate on accounts assessed interest (about 21–22 per cent) follows the Federal Reserve's G.19 release; the figure of roughly a hundred and thirty billion dollars in card interest and fees in 2022 follows the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau. Interchange or "swipe" fee figures (on the order of $187–224 billion in 2023–24, averaging roughly 2–3 per cent per transaction, with Visa and Mastercard controlling better than four-fifths of the market, costing the average family well over a thousand dollars a year, and characterised by reform advocates as a "private sales tax") follow the Nilson Report, CMSPI, the Congressional Research Service, and the Merchants Payments Coalition; the stalled Credit Card Competition Act is on the legislative record. Campaign-finance figures (a 2024 federal cycle of roughly sixteen billion dollars; winning House seats in the millions and Senate seats often in the tens of millions; the post-2010 growth of super-PAC and dark-money spending following *Citizens United v. FEC*) follow OpenSecrets, the Federal Election Commission, and the Brennan Center. Wealth-concentration figures (the top one per cent holding roughly a third of household wealth and the top tenth roughly two-thirds) follow the Federal Reserve's Distributional Financial Accounts. The contested claim about elite influence on policy is given from both sides: Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page's 2014 study "Testing Theories of American Politics," which found economic elites and business groups far more influential than average citizens, and the significant scholarly critiques of it (including work by Peter Enns and by Branham, Soroka, and Wlezien) arguing that the finding is overstated because elite and middle-class preferences are highly correlated. The observation that federal transfer and social-insurance spending far exceeds military and police spending follows the standard federal budget data and is included precisely to keep the analysis honest: the modern American state is not only a floor-funder but also, on a vast scale, a redistributor, a fact that complicates any simple model of a closed oligarchy and is part of what this study weighs. Where the facts are disputed — the true degree of elite capture, the real openness of the political system — the dispute is stated rather than resolved. Nothing in this analysis is a partisan brief; the framework applies the same lens to this order that it applied to the Temple and the House, and lands, as the author does, on reform rather than revolution. *Part of the collection* Patterns of Power. *Tested, never revealed.*